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AUTHOR Johnstone, Monica
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ABSTRACT

Magazine writing courses lean heavily on a model borrowed from journalism, but this is not the only, nor the most advantageous, model to apply to magazine writing. Despite the differences between the constraints that magazine writers and news writers face, many texts on magazine writing are reminiscent of textbooks on basic news writing. However, the rich heritage of the discipline of rhetoric and its modern offspring, composition studies, offers the magazine writer a wide and versatile vocabulary, a long tradition of descriptive analysis and critical thinking, and an elastic notion of genre. Perhaps most important is the basic premise that writing is not about information processing; instead it is about writers and readers and the way they can connect. A rhetorically-minded magazine writing textbook would answer the interdisciplinary calls for critical thinking instruction, and it would give students a more coherent experience as they go from freshman composition and English literature to journalism. (RS)

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A Rhetorical Approach to Journalistic Writing

Monica Johnstone, Ph.D.
Department of Writing and Media
Loyola College in Maryland

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A Rhetorical Approach to Journalistic Writing

by Monica Johnstone, Ph.D.
Dept. of Writing & Media
Loyola College in Maryland

The case I'd like to make is twofold: first, that magazine writing courses lean heavily on a model borrowed from journalism, and second, that this is not the only, nor the most advantageous, model to apply to magazine writing. As my title suggests, I will offer a model instead borrowed from the ancient and forever young discipline of rhetoric.

I

To substantiate my claim that magazine writing is taught on a journalistic model I will call your attention to a few concrete examples in popular textbooks. Though necessarily reductive of the actual complexity of teaching in any field, textbooks do at least provide us with something concrete. As my standard of journalistic method I've selected the popular textbook by Mel Mencher, Basic News Writing.[1] For those not already familiar with this text, here is a slightly abreviated version of its table of contents:

Journalists in Action

1. In the Newsroom and on the Beat [example stories]
2. Focus on the Journalist [traits, salaries]
3. Making the News Story [determinants of news]

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[1]Melvin Mencher, Basic News Writing, 2nd ed. (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publ., 1986). Mencher's News Reporting and Writing (5th ed.) can be seen as a similar, though more complex, example.

Reporting

4. Finding Information and Gathering Facts
5. How Reporters Work

Writing

6. Planning the Story [Feature or News? Lead and Structure, Facts, Writing style (3 pages)]
7. Rudiments of the News Story [brevity, clarity, human interest...]
8. Writing the lead
9. Structuring the Story
10. Making the words work [grammar, cliches, copy editing...]
11. Fine Tuning the Story [revision]
12. Broadcast Writing [style rules, writing guidelines]

Story Types

13. The Interview
14. Capturing the Spoken Word
15. From the Office and On the Beat [crime, court, obit, sports, weather...]

Photojournalism

16. Visual Reporting

Laws and Codes

17. Libel, Ethics and Taste

Notice what is assumed here. For instance, it is assumed that coming up with subject matter is not a particular difficulty. News is out there waiting to be reported on. Rules and guidelines seem to govern style. We find no chapter on creating a distinctive voice, for instance. Brevity and clarity reign as the supreme stylistic virtues.[2] Professionalism is defined through integrity, thoroughness of research and reportorial technique, and knowledge of and adherence to genre expectations.

Next it is instructive to recast what is found in Mencher in terms of the five offices of rhetoric, which the ancients define as Invention, Distribution or Arrangement, Elocution or Style, Memory, and Delivery. In Basic News Writing we find little exploration of

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[2] for an interesting discussion of the problem of clarity as stylistic virtue, see Richard Lanham, Style: An Anti-textbook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

invention, prescriptive rules for **arrangement**, a minimal account of acceptable **style**, a brief nod to **memory** (in the form of note taking), and an implied attention to **delivery** in the section on Broadcast Writing. This seems fairly appropriate to the needs of the news journalist given the tight constraints that sort of writing is under--both conventional and temporal.

But are these the same constraints the magazine writer faces? In fact, there are some significant differences. The feature writer and the writer of magazine articles may have great freedom to choose subject matter. Article length is less restrictive. Preparation time is frequently longer. Voice is a more relevant concern. And for all of these reasons, structure is less strictly dictated.

Oddly enough, despite all of these changes, many texts on magazine writing are reminiscient of Mencher's Basic News Writing. For instance, Peter Jacobi's The Magazine Article: How to Think It, Plan It, Write It[3] promises us a "four-step writing process," "ten rules to write by" and "eight techniques from poetry that will improve your magazine writing." In short, we get very prescriptive advice in handy innumerated bits. To be fair, there is concern for where ideas come from, discussion of structuring, and an interest in narrative techniques. But even here we see that invention, arrangement and style are information driven. The "news" is still out there. For example, in his chapter on Narration and Description you are promised that "using storytelling techniques

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[3]Peter Jacobi, The Magazine Article (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1991).

will humanize your information." This, of course assumes that articles are about the information they contain. This is a very limited view of the possibilities.[4] In fact, this sort of basic assumption would rule out the very writing that avid and educated readers would like to praise most highly.

One could object that students rarely have at the center of their writing a wonderful original idea; more frequently they write **about** something in the external world. Perhaps, one might go on, it is pie-in-the-sky pedagogy to promote anything but information-driven writing. But we cannot aspire to very much when we hand our students a text which sells:

> Proven article-writing techniques, including: Hooking readers with style and technique, compressing lots of information into a small space to make a big impression on readers, and using fictionalization to heighten impact or lend universality.[5]

Jacobi seems to want to give students valuable practical knowledge, but we could fault him for presenting it in such a way as to make students think their job is to pull one over on readers.

Jacobi is not alone. Myrick E. Land's Writing for Magazines[6] shares the journalistic penchant for information, interviewing techniques, limited and limiting sense of genre, concern for law, professionalism, and desire to think of style mainly in terms of

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[4] At the AEJMC Convention in Williamsburg, Virginia, April 4, 1991, Judith Dobler spoke to this concern in her section of the session entitled, "Making Writing Central to the Journalistic/Magazine Curriculum."

[5] Jacobi, "Contents".

[6] Myrick E. Land, Writing for Magazines (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1987).

clarity. Barbara Kevles' Basic Magazine Writing: How to master the seven most important article forms and get published in the leading national magazines[7] is, not surprisingly, similar. Without beating a dead horse, many magazine writing books show their journalistic roots in their prescriptiveness, their assumption that writing is information driven, their questionable relationship to audience, and their concern with professional issues over issues of creativity.

These books seem to be the rule to which there are, thankfully, exceptions. Edward Jay Friedlander and John Lee's Feature Writing for Newspapers & Magazines[8] is one that has several of the qualities I will later promote as a corrective to the books mentioned thus far. It is not that better books do not exist; it is just that they are voices crying as if in the wilderness.

II

There is another way. The rich heritage of the discipline of rhetoric and her modern offspring, composition studies, offers the magazine writer a wide and versatile vocabulary, a long tradition of descriptive analysis and critical thinking, and an elastic notion of genre. Perhaps most important is the basic premise that writing is not about information processing; instead it is about writers and readers and the way they can connect. If we entertain the possibility that Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg

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[7]Barbara Kevles, Basic Magazine Writing (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1987).

[8] Edward Jay Friedlander & John Lee, Feature Writing for Newspapers & Magazines: The Pursuit of Excellence (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

speak for many rhetoricians, linguists, and philosophers when they write that "knowledge is a linguistically constructed and consensual arrangement," then the stakes are rather high.[9]

To illustrate, most current texts assume that the magazine article, like the news story, exists to tell readers about some event or thing or person of note. Under this model, the writer, let's call her Sarah, sees her job as one of presenting clearly and pallatably information about, say, a factory closing. In contrast, an actual former student, Malcolm, recently sent me a moving piece he had written about being a closer of factories--he had recently quit his high-salary consulting job because he felt it was unethical to produce the studies which he knew would be used as justifications for sending jobs overseas. He clearly brought out the kinship he felt with the men on the line and his alienation from the other consultants at the home office. Sarah's piece has its place, certainly; but a model that would not allow for Malcolm's is impoverished.

Information would continue have an important place in this scheme but it is not mistaken for the scheme itself. As so much 20th century literary criticism reminds us, the subject is frequently the writer and his or her thoughts as much as or even more than about something "out there." Part of what we love about magazine writing is that it is not just news writ large.

You may be wondering what this new, more rhetorically-minded magazine writing text would look like. It might well begin by

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[9] The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present, ed. by Patericia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 921.

looking at a range of examples of magazine articles and discussing how differently they are structured and how distinct their voices are from one another as their authors strove to create a meeting of the minds between themselves and their readers within the confines of the publications in which they appeared. For instance, selections might include Bill McKibben's extensive article for the New Yorker, "The End of Nature" with its insights into the disappearance of wilderness, and Dinesh D'Souza's polemical "Illiberal Education" which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly, perhaps a chestnut by Agee or McPhee, and a Pulitzer-winning profile such as Anne O'Hare McCormick's 1937 New York Times piece, "A Portrait of a Pope" which describes the pontif by using an extensive vocabulary drawn from painting. In the face of this sort of breadth the "rules" shrink away.

In our new rhetorical text, discussions of techniques would be open-ended rather than inclusively numbered. The editor-writer relationship would be discussed as an important subset of audience concerns rather than at the expense of any discussion of audience that did not smack of pandering.

The concerns of professionalism would be noted as important features of the writer's ethos and ethical responsibility rather than as rules which cater to lawsuit-avoidance. The credibility of the author and the public trust would be provided as positive values instead of tacitly promoting the idea that the only line not to be crossed is the one that leads to a loss of money through lost circulation or being sued.

And all discussions of style would note the limits of mere

clarity. Through a variety of examples and exercises students would see that style is not an afterthought or an add-on. It is, in fact, a clue to the mind at work. Beyond tired discussions of simile and metaphor, this rhetorical text on magazine writing would show students that the discovery of underlying tropes, figures of speech and thought, can be a principle of organization, a point of departure, or the key to door of invention.

This new descriptive, elastic, organic, ethically complex textbook would not be easy to write. The students might not like it at first because it would not provide easy to memorize rubrics. But it would engage the students and the teachers and the best of the published magazine writers in a realistic dialogue. It would answer the interdisciplinary calls for critical thinking instruction. And it would give the students a more coherent experience as they go from freshman composition and English Lit to journalism. In short, it would integrate, at least in the magazine writing courses, the concerns of professionalism with those of the liberal arts.